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Henry Waxman to retire

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Veteran California Democrat Henry Waxman, whose legislative and political savvy helped remake the American health care system, reveal tobacco's dangers and expose steroids in baseball, will retire at the end of the 113th Congress.

"I will have completed 40 years in Congress by the end of this year," Waxman said in an interview with POLITICO in his Capitol Hill office this week. "I think it's time to let somebody else come in and take on some of these fights."

Since Waxman arrived in the Capitol during the Watergate era, his reach has extended nationally. As the top Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee during the George W. Bush administration, he was a pugnacious partisan who sought to hold the White House accountable. When President Barack Obama was elected, Waxman came out on top of a bitter brawl within the Democratic Caucus when he knocked off Michigan Rep. John Dingell to chair the House Energy and Commerce Committee, where he helped craft Obamacare, as well as legislation that sought to drastically slash carbon emissions.

"I leave with a lot of satisfaction for the accomplishments that I've had in my congressional career," Waxman said in the interview. "And I think it's time for me to move on to the next chapter of my life."

Waxman's retirement, which he announced Thursday, is the latest blow to House Democrats, who've endured a string of high-profile retirement announcements in recent weeks. Waxman's seat will likely remain in Democratic control, but taken together, the departures suggest that party veterans don't believe their party will take back the House in the fall.

(PHOTOS: [Who's leaving Congress?](#))

Waxman himself insists his retirement has nothing to do with whether Democrats can recapture the House. He is confident he would win a 21st term if he ran.

"I don't accept the idea that Democrats won't get the House back," Waxman said. "I think that the Republicans have nothing to offer. They're against everything. They're against everything Obama wanted. They have no alternatives on health care policy. They have nothing to say, they have nothing to offer."

"I just think it's time to move on," Waxman added.

Rep. George Miller, another California Democrat who came to Washington in 1975, will also retire. Both Miller and Waxman are close confidants of Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), and their departures further shrink the ranks of Pelosi's political allies in a key election

year. Should she win reelection in November — as expected — Pelosi will be the senior-most member of the California delegation.

Pelosi praised Waxman on Thursday.

“For the past four decades, Congressman Henry Waxman’s name has been synonymous with responsible action, extraordinary legislative skill, passionate public service, and bold leadership on behalf of Los Angeles, California, and the American people,” she said.

Waxman’s departure is a big loss for California.

From his Los Angeles-area seat, Waxman — along with former Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.) — spent decades building a Democratic machine in California, influencing the makeup of the state’s delegation and building a power base in Washington.

The Golden State’s delegation has undergone a drastic remaking since 2012. In 2012, veteran Rep. David Dreier (R) retired, and in 2014, the GOP will lose Armed Services Chairman Buck McKeon. Former Democratic Rep. Pete Stark, a 40-year veteran of the House, was defeated in 2012, and Democrats will be without Waxman and Miller in 2014.

Waxman has plenty of legislation to his credit — including serving as a major force behind Obamacare, Medicare expansion and a cap-and-trade bill that passed the House and died in the Senate.

The walls of his Rayburn office are lined with photos of presidents signing bills he authored and shots of him with world leaders. His liberal district long gave Waxman the leeway to focus on national and international issues. And this week, his staff distributed a 26-page memo of his major legislative accomplishments. Waxman, who was the first in his family to earn a college degree, said his parents taught him that the government should look out for the poor and disadvantaged because they have “no one else to argue for them.”

(PHOTOS: Senators up for election in 2014)

“I’ve always felt that government can play a very important, positive role in the people’s lives,” Waxman said. “I learned that from my family; they were ardent Democrats. They were scarred by the Depression.”

Some of Waxman’s legislative priorities took more than a decade to enact, like the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments.

The highlights of Waxman’s record include enactment of the 2010 Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare. Waxman and Pelosi passed a bill limiting greenhouse gas emissions, but it stalled in the Senate. Waxman led the push for a major expansion of Medicaid and children’s health programs and worked to help AIDS victims by passing the Ryan White CARE Act. He sought to protect consumers by mandating nutrition and cigarette warning labels, pushing food safety regulation and numerous safeguards for prescription drugs.

Waxman also made headlines for years with his oversight investigations. The 1994 image of Waxman forcing seven Big Tobacco executives to testify on the health problems caused by smoking became iconic. After one tobacco CEO suggested that cigarettes are no more addictive than coffee, tea or Twinkies, Waxman’s retort was brutal: “The difference between cigarettes and Twinkies is death.”

One of the most important moments in Waxman's career came in November 2008, when Obama was elected, and the California Democrat decided to take on Dingell for chairmanship of the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee.

Obama was expected to push through a health care overhaul and energy legislation. Whoever was atop the panel would be a key player.

At the time, Waxman said Democrats "needed a change in leadership, and the public was clamoring for the change." Dingell had been the top Democrat on the committee for 27 years.

"I ran for the Energy and Commerce chairmanship against John Dingell because when President Obama was elected, I knew that his first year was probably the time we had the time to do things that I thought were so important," Waxman said of the hugely controversial battle between two high-profile Democrats. "I thought that I was in better position to get some of those things done."

Pelosi was officially neutral in the struggle between the Democratic icons, but it was clear that Waxman would not be challenging Dingell if Pelosi was opposed.

Waxman eventually won in a closed-door vote, 137-122. Dingell was appointed "chairman emeritus" of the panel, but his power was gone. Waxman says he "gets along very well with John Dingell. I have enormous respect for him."

Back home, Waxman's district became more competitive after redistricting following the 2010 census. For decades, Sacramento lawmakers drew maps to help protect incumbents. A redistricting commission took over this last time, and it gave Waxman conservative areas on the Palos Verdes peninsula. In 2012, he won with 54 percent — a safe margin, but his weakest showing in four decades. He would've faced several challengers in 2014, yet Waxman was highly confident he would win.

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